

Incorporating Malone-Stranger Review

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Perhaps not fashionable, but this issue is respectfully dedicated to B. Franklin and T. Jefferson and honoring their considerable literary skills -- in each instance directed by an enlightened, scientifically-aware, very pragmatic, human-oriented intelligence.



PORTABLE SHERWOOD ANDERSON

At the end of the
bicentennial summer,
a lady was traveling east
in a car that had seen better days,
traveling from Oregon to Michigan
for reasons that will remain unknown to us.
She was sitting beside her husband
reading a certain book
to pass the time.

Now I might as well tell you
the specific identity of that book
was The Portable Sherwood Anderson
and I was that lady traveling
as I have every summer for ten years
the road between Oregon and Michigan,
for reasons we will continue to ignore,
since what matters is the journey itself
and the road and the book and the season
and the sense of the country one gets
from two thousand four hundred miles worth
of look-alike interstate rest areas.

Wherever we stopped,
in Oregon or Wyoming or Iowa,
all along Interstate 80,

there'd be the same big brick bathroom
with the same electric
hot-air hand-dryers (for our protection)
and the same redwood information centers
and picnic benches and pet walking areas.
In Idaho or Illinois or Nebraska,
I'd ride along reading
The Portable Sherwood Anderson
and when I looked up, there it would be --
something brick that looked just like
the last one.

The Stuckeys and Texacos
were cut from one design
and Little America
was a great big gas station.
A sad feeling slipped over me
like the dark at the end of summer
on the eastern ends of time zones,
a sadness at how one place was getting to be
too much like another,
tasteless and conveniently speedy
like a factory hamburger.

And then it happened,
just this side of Laramie,
or Kearney -- or Joliet,
as we pulled into a rest area
with a statue of Abraham Lincoln,
where a CB radio club
was passing out free coffee in styrofoam cups,
and giving away red, white and blue bicentennial
anti-litter bumper stickers,
which a guy in a blue Dodge pickup
with a "love it or leave it" sign took two of
and left,
as did the couple in the van
with airbrush gargoyles all over it
and a diffenbachia hanging in the rear window.

It happened so quickly,
I almost didn't notice the boy in embroidered levis
calling and calling on the payphone,
calling to someone who didn't answer.
He knocked his forehead against the payphone,
gently, gently, waiting
for someone who didn't answer.

And I almost didn't see
the family of eight climbing out of the station wagon
with charcoal and lawn chairs,
beach balls and steaks,

a parakeet in a green plastic cage
and battery television.
When I spotted the traveler,
I was so intent on reaching him,
I walked past the mini-bus named "Utopia,"
past the red-haired cowgirl
and the Latin-looking man with five poodles;
I almost stumbled over the old couple
announcing the end of the world.
I took one of their pamphlets that warned
we would all be devoured pretty soon
by a beast that resembles Godzilla,
but I brushed them off politely
and made my way toward the stranger
with sad, familiar eyes.
I thought he might be a relative of mine
for he looked like a misplaced dreamer
or a failed chicken farmer
who had come to this rest area
like some kind of mid-American
ancient mariner.
I thought he was eating his lunch
for he had an egg in his hand
but he didn't crack it or eat it.
He just looked at it, turning it around.
He stared at the egg.
Then he looked at me.
I looked at him.
He looked at the egg again, reflectively.

And then I asked him.
Clutching my Portable Sherwood Anderson,
standing in an obscure rest area on Interstate 80
somewhere west of Rawlins, or Davenport, or Gary,
I stammered my question.
"Mister -- don't I know you from somewhere?
You famous or something?"

"Could be," he answered.
"No one knows more about eggs than I do."

THE DRAWING INSTRUCTOR

I will teach you
an old drawing class trick.
If you want to draw
a straight line,
make a dot
where you want your line
to end up.